

Cynthia A. McKinney

1955–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM GEORGIA

1993–2003; 2005–



Image courtesy of the Member

CYNTHIA MCKINNEY WAS ELECTED TO THE U.S. HOUSE of Representatives in 1992, becoming the first African-American woman from Georgia to serve in Congress. With a résumé that included graduate work in international relations, Representative McKinney earned seats on the Armed Services and International Relations committees, where she was an influential voice on human rights and civil rights issues. Having lost her 2002 re-election bid, McKinney was returned to the House by voters in her DeKalb County-centered district in 2004, making her one of a handful of women to serve nonconsecutive terms.

Cynthia Ann McKinney was born on March 17, 1955, in Atlanta, Georgia, to Leola Christion McKinney, a nurse, and James Edward “Billy” McKinney, a police officer, civil rights activist, and longtime legislator in the Georgia house of representatives. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, she and her father participated in demonstrations that inspired her to enter politics. McKinney graduated from St. Joseph High School and, in 1978, earned a B.A. in international relations from the University of Southern California. She later pursued graduate studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Medford, Massachusetts. In 1984, she served as a diplomatic fellow at Spelman College in Atlanta. She then taught political science at Agnes Scott College in Decatur and at Clark Atlanta University. Cynthia McKinney married Coy Grandison, a Jamaican politician. The couple had a son, Coy, Jr., before divorcing in 1985. In 1988, spurred by her father, McKinney won election as an At-Large state representative in the Georgia legislature. The McKinneys became the first father–daughter combination to serve concurrently in the same state legislature.¹

In 1992, when the Georgia legislature created three majority African-American districts, McKinney chose to run in one of them which encompassed much of DeKalb County east of Atlanta to Augusta and continued southward to the coastal city of Savannah. She won election to the 103rd Congress (1993–1995) with 73 percent of the vote against her Republican opponent. Despite court-ordered redistricting in 1994 (which placed McKinney in a newly created, majority-white district), she won her subsequent four re-election bids by comfortable margins of about 60 percent.²

When McKinney was sworn into the 103rd Congress, she received assignments on the Agriculture and Foreign Affairs (later named International Relations) committees. Over the next several Congresses she received membership on several other panels. In the 104th Congress (1995–1997), she won a seat on the Banking and Finance Committee, where she served two terms. In the 105th Congress (1997–1999), Representative McKinney was assigned to the National Security Committee (later renamed the Armed Services Committee).

In the House, Congresswoman McKinney was known for her unconventional attire—her trademark pair of gold tennis shoes—and a readiness to speak out on issues ranging from human rights abuses abroad to social inequities at home. As an advocate for poor and working-class Americans, McKinney opposed federal efforts to restrict abortions, particularly a long-standing bill known as the Hyde Amendment, which largely withheld federal funding of abortions through Medicaid. In one debate on the House Floor, McKinney described the amendment as “nothing but a discriminatory policy against poor women, who happen to be disproportionately black.”³

On the International Relations Committee, where she eventually served as Ranking Member on the International Operations and Human Rights Subcommittee, McKinney tried to curb weapons sales to countries that violate human rights, sponsoring the Arms Transfers Code of Conduct, which passed the House in 1997, to prevent the sale of weapons to dictators. In 1999, she partnered with a Republican colleague to insert a similar provision into a State Department Reauthorization Bill. A year later, she voted against full trade relations with China, citing Beijing’s poor human rights record. McKinney frequently challenged American foreign policy during this period: arguing against the 1999 bombing campaign in Kosovo, opposing U.S. sanctions against Iraq, and questioning much of Washington’s Middle East policy. After the 2001 terrorist attacks, McKinney criticized the George W. Bush administration, implying that Washington officials did not do enough to prevent the devastating attacks in New York City and the nation’s capital.⁴

In 2002, McKinney lost to challenger Denise Majette in a heated Democratic primary during her bid for re-election to a sixth term. Majette handily won the general election in November. Two years later, however, when the incumbent made a bid for an open Senate seat from Georgia, McKinney won the Democratic primary for the vacated seat and easily was elected to the 109th Congress (2005–2007) with 64 percent of the vote. McKinney won back her assignment on the Armed Services Committee and also received a seat on the Budget Committee.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, “Cynthia Ann McKinney,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 *Current Biography*, 1996 (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1996): 352–353.
- 2 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>; *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2002): 444.
- 3 *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 266–267; *Current Biography*, 1996: 353–354.
- 4 On McKinney’s legislative interests relating to foreign affairs, see “Official Biography of Cynthia McKinney,” <http://www.house.gov/mckinney/bio.htm> (accessed 23 July 2002); see also, *Politics in America*, 2002: 266.